

# Buddhism

by Paul Williams



from a Catholic Perspective



CTS EXPLANATIONS

# BUDDHISM

FROM A

## CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

by  
Paul Williams

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## WHAT IS BUDDHISM?

Buddhism is the ‘-ism’ that is named after the *Buddha*. The word Buddha is not a name, like ‘Archibald’ or ‘Freda’, it is a title. It means, in the ancient Indian languages (e.g. Sanskrit and Pali) from which it is derived, an *Awakened One*. It refers to one who has awakened in the deepest, most life-transforming way, to a final understanding of the way things truly are. In coming to this understanding he (there is little evidence in ancient Indian sources that a Buddha, as such, could be a she) is held to have brought to an end for himself all the forces that lead to suffering, frustration, disharmony and, in short, all those negative experiences that we would rather do without. These negative experiences that a Buddha has escaped from are, and have been, ours not just in this life but also in past lives, for Buddhists believe in reincarnation. And, Buddhists claim, there is no chronological first beginning to the series of past lives. We have all of us been reincarnated an infinite number of times. No god is needed, either to start the series off - there was no first beginning - or to explain why there is anything at all rather than nothing. There just are things, and always have been things, and questioning that is both pointless and irrelevant to the overriding and intensely practical aim of overcoming suffering. We have all experienced infinite suffering, and we shall continue to be reborn and to suffer until we ‘see things the way they really are’ and bring to a complete and final end the forces within us that have led to so much suffering. These forces are mental acts (*karma*) of greed, hatred and ignorance (or ‘delusion’), and they power the physical actions that spring from those ‘three root poisons’. Such acts have been ours throughout infinite past time, they lead to our suffering, but they are not essential to us. We can completely eradicate them, and produce instead their opposites - altruism, loving-kindness, and wisdom. A Buddha is one who has developed these positive qualities to their highest degree, their perfection.

In achieving this goal the Buddha has not simply abandoned others. Out of his altruism, loving-kindness and wisdom the Buddha has also taught the way for others to follow him and achieve for themselves what he has done. His teaching, and the way things truly are - which he has discovered and that

is expressed in his teaching - is known in Sanskrit as the *Dharma* (Pali: *Dhamma*). This all-but-untranslatable term carries with it the senses of: 'Teaching', 'Doctrine' 'The Way It Is', 'Things As They Really Are' - and perhaps also a little of the sense of 'Righteousness', all rolled into one. For lay supporters and donors the Buddha taught mainly basic moral teachings, but his particular interest was in establishing an Order of renouncers - monks and nuns - who could devote themselves full-time to following the Way he mapped out for them in the Dharma. Inasmuch as this Way sets out to reverse psychological forces that are deeply ingrained habits from infinite lifetimes, it requires dedicated practice in morality, in meditation, and in wisdom. It is not a Way for amateurs. Thus the Buddha also established the *Samgha*. This Order in its fullest sense consists of four parts: the monks, the nuns, and pious and devoted male and female lay supporters, although the term *Samgha* is also commonly used to refer to just the monks and nuns.

These three components, Buddha, Dharma and Samgha, are known in Buddhism as the 'Three Jewels'. The minimum requirement for being a Buddhist is to 'take refuge' in the Three Jewels (and, of course, to act on them in one's life). One takes refuge in the Buddha as the one who has come to understand, realise and teach the way things really are, the way that alone leads to final cessation of all suffering and other negative states. One takes refuge in the Dharma as the correct expression of the way things are, and the way to achieve deep liberative realisation of it. One takes refuge in the Samgha as the community of exemplars, those who are following this Way and demonstrating its truth in their lives.

### **The Buddha**

I began by talking about *a* Buddha, one who has awakened to the true way things really are, and taught it. The implication here (correctly) is that there can be more than one Buddha. Anyone who achieves what a Buddha achieves is a Buddha. Since time is infinite, in infinite time there have been many past Buddhas and there will be many (actually, infinite) Buddhas in the future too. Since Buddhism - the Dharma - is considered to be the true way of things, it is not invented by a Buddha but is rather *discovered*. A Buddha discovers this liberating truth, he teaches it, the teaching flourishes but eventually in the course of time it is completely lost. After a long period of time when there is no Buddhism another person becomes a Buddha. He rediscovers and teaches

the truth. And so on, throughout all time.

I also spoke above about *the* Buddha, the one who historically established the religion we know in English as ‘Buddhism’. I want now to say a bit more about who *the* Buddha - ‘our’ Buddha - actually was. But first a note of caution. Buddhist tradition has established various versions of the life-story of the Buddha. Modern scholars, however, are extremely wary about accepting as historical fact much more than the very basic outline and flavour of this story. For what we find in the traditional Buddhist life-story of the Buddha is something more akin to a medieval *hagiography* (a ‘holy saint’s tale’) than to modern history. What such a hagiography does is show what the religious tradition, often many years later, considered *for the purposes of religious teaching* to be the important themes of the life portrayed. The saint’s life illustrates perfectly the sacred teachings; the Buddha’s life illustrates his Dharma. Details of historical fact are at best secondary and are often ignored.

### **Life of Sākyamuni Buddha**

Scholars are unsure about when exactly the Buddha lived. Older books have him dying sometime around 480 BC although now there is some consensus that nearer 400 BC may be closer to the mark. Tradition names him *Siddhārtha Gautamai*,<sup>1</sup> although after he became awakened, or enlightened, Siddhārtha was henceforth known as *Śākyamuni Buddha*. That is, he was the Buddha who was the ‘sage’ (*muni*) of the *Śākya* clan. The *Śākyas* lived in the foothills of what would nowadays be southern Nepal. Tradition also has it that the young Siddhārtha was born a prince. He was certainly born into a prosperous family. The hagiography claims that had Siddhārtha not become a Buddha - the supreme achievement of the spiritual world - he would have become a world-conquering monarch, the supreme achievement of the worldly life. He grew up living a luxurious and hedonistic life, and married a beautiful bride who subsequently gave birth to their son. What changed everything was the young man’s discovery, in a series of disturbing experiences, that all - including himself - were bound to suffer in life through such torments as old age, sickness, and death. Reincarnation, by this time well-established in India, meant such suffering would simply be repeated infinitely unless something was done to bring an end to this endless cycle (a cycle known in Sanskrit and Pali as *saṃsāra*). Renunciation of the worldly



life in favour of an ascetic life in the jungle to discover, through meditation, how to eradicate the forces that led to suffering and reincarnation, was a route Siddhārtha felt he simply had to follow.

One night Siddhārtha fled his home, cut off all his hair and donned tan-coloured robes made from discarded rags (acts of complete renunciation of his previous luxurious life and wealth). He set off into the jungle to find a teacher who could teach him the way to follow. Henceforth, his scant food came from asking for alms. It is said that Siddhārtha studied with many teachers, and indeed surpassed each of his teachers in his mastery of asceticism and deep meditation. From a life of extreme indulgence he now adopted a lifestyle of intense mortification. So impressive was he, that Siddhārtha himself acquired several disciples, sure that when he became enlightened he would then be able to teach them the truth he had discovered. But still the liberating truth eluded him. Siddhārtha came to realise that such mortification was no more effective in attaining the spiritual insight necessary to overcome suffering than was hedonistic indulgence. Overcoming suffering is a matter of the *mind*, not bodily asceticism. He took to eating a moderate diet again, and sat down in meditation under a tree, the tree that was later to be known as the ‘tree of enlightenment’ (*bodhi*). Thinking Siddhārtha had given up the struggle, his disciples abandoned him. He was now alone, but it was during this period of solitary meditation that Siddhārtha broke through to the deep transformative insight that enabled him, it is said, to shatter forever the forces of suffering and rebirth (*saṃsāra*). He was now the Buddha, the Awakened One. Śākyamuni Buddha sought out his former disciples, who were the first to hear what he had discovered. Following his teachings, they too put an end to all suffering and rebirth. They too achieved their final goal.

Śākyamuni Buddha taught all who would hear him, including members of his family. His wife and son both joined the Order he established, and attained enlightenment. He travelled widely in north India and died in his early eighties. His body was cremated, and relic shrines (*stūpa*) were established. Asked to appoint a successor, it is said that the Buddha refused. His successor would be the Dharma, the discovery that he had made and taught, a priority which Buddhists themselves would agree with. The priority should not be the Buddha himself, as such. He was just a man who had realised at the deepest possible level, and taught, the objectively true Teachings. Although subsequent Buddhist reflection has detailed what he must have achieved in previous lives in order to achieve such a great

discovery, the historical figure of the Buddha has no great significance for Buddhists. If it were shown conclusively that Śākyamuni Buddha had never existed, it would be no great disaster for Buddhists, provided the Dharma is indeed the Dharma, and enlightenment is truly possible.

## The Dharma

What did the Buddha discover? What, in a nutshell, were his teachings? In what follows I shall outline some of the central teachings of Buddhism, teachings that can plausibly be traced back to the Buddha himself, and that in their broad sense can be thought common to all Buddhists. In that sense they form the core of what scholars might be inclined nowadays to call 'Mainstream Buddhism'.

Many of the basic teachings of Buddhism can be found neatly stated in an early discourse known as the *Discourse Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma* (Pali: *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*), traditionally held to be the Buddha's first teaching, after his enlightenment. His teachings are organised around what is known as the 'Four Noble Truths'.

### **1. Dukkha**

This states our 'existential malady' which the Buddha, in the manner of a 'transcendental doctor', sets out to remedy. *Dukkha* (P) is usually translated as 'suffering.' Absolutely everything the Buddha wants to say that pertains to an unenlightened individual is dukkha. This includes even happy situations such as laughter and joy, if they are the laughter and joy of one who is not enlightened. All unenlightenment is suffering. Buddhists in the modern world are sensitive to the suggestion that this might make them appear rather pessimistic or even miserable. Buddhists, of course, are no *more* miserable than anyone else, and so there is considerable caution about the translation of dukkha as 'suffering'.

It is pointed out that Buddhist tradition accepts three sorts of dukkha. First, there is straightforward pain. This is called *dukkhadukkha* - i.e. the dukkha which [really] is dukkha, suffering. But there is also the dukkha which is simply that unhappiness which accompanies transience, the mutability of all things, even our happiness. And finally there is the dukkha that is what all unenlightenment is, merely because it is not enlightenment.

Hence laughter is dukkha not because it is literally painful, but because all our ordinary unenlightened happiness in the end ceases. That is why modern translators sometimes prefer English expressions like ‘unsatisfactoriness’ for ‘dukkha’. But it is clear that the word ‘dukkha’ in its everyday usage does indeed mean ‘suffering’, pain. That is why the expression dukkhadukkha can be used in this technical context to mean ‘the dukkha which *really* (or, we might say, *obviously*, non-controversially) is dukkha’, - as when you step on a drawing pin in bare feet. But as a technical term in Buddhism, ‘dukkha’ has come to have a specialised usage that is wider than simply ‘suffering’. Hence, ‘suffering’ in Buddhism is wider in meaning than simply ‘pain’. This should be borne in mind in coming to understand Buddhism. But the term used throughout is the standard one for suffering nevertheless. All unenlightenment is, through and through, suffering. And Buddhism is first and foremost offered as a solution to this all-pervasive suffering.

## **2. Origin**

If we knew the origin of suffering we should be able to overcome it. The origin of suffering is said to be *craving*.<sup>2</sup> Craving, is of course, fundamentally something to do with the mind. If Buddhism is about overcoming suffering, and the cause of suffering is held to be mental, then it follows that Buddhism is about (working on) the mind. God, or other grand metaphysical ‘theories’, are irrelevant; but so too is fierce asceticism, torturing the body. Craving is said to include craving for sensual pleasures, but also craving for an eternal life or for its opposite, a sort of suicide, ‘a complete end to it all’. Craving thus leads to attachment. And attachment will inevitably bring about suffering since attachment is incompatible with a fundamental feature of the world around us - its impermanence. The obvious impermanence of things, and our equally obvious attempts to avoid coming to terms with this, is central to Buddhism. We crave things that are impermanent, that are certain to perish. When they do perish (ourselves and our loved ones included), we suffer. Seeing things the way they *really* are, in their deepest possible lifetransformative manner, leads to a cessation of craving and of suffering. Thus, other early Buddhist sources suggest that what is even more fundamental than craving in bringing about suffering, is ignorance: ignorance of the way things really are as represented in the Four Noble Truths - crucially, failing to recognise the nature of things as impermanent and

suffering.<sup>3</sup> Note, however, that ignorance is not thought to be a first cause in the sense that once there was nothing, and ignorance brought things about. There never was a time in the past when there was nothing. The series of past incarnations is, for each one of us, infinite. But ignorance is the first cause in the sense that once it is overcome by someone, there is no more reincarnation for that person. Hence, suffering for him or her has ended. That is *nirvāṇa*.

### 3. Cessation

The way to eradicate suffering is through the destruction of its cause, ignorance, and thence the cessation of craving. The result of this is enlightenment, *nirvāṇa* (P: *nibbāna*). The first point to understand is that, fundamentally, ‘*nirvāṇa*’ describes what has been attained by a person who has come to see things the way they really are, and has put a stop once and for all to all the forces of ignorance and craving that lead to continued rebirth and thus continued suffering in life after life. *Nirvāṇa* refers primarily to the cessation, the ‘blowing out’, of those forces of ignorance and craving from that person’s mind. That is all. The person who has attained *nirvāṇa*, while still alive, is said to have ‘*nirvāṇa* with a remainder’, that is, the remainder of his or her psychophysical constituents (i.e. his body and embodied mind). In other words, he or she has not yet died. After death there is ‘*nirvāṇa* without a remainder’. The psychophysical constituents (*skandhas* - q.v.) have ceased. There is thence no more basis to which words can be attached. After the death of the person who is enlightened there is no more suffering. Nothing more can be said. To attempt to do so is fruitless. Early Buddhist tradition was emphatic that we cannot say enlightened beings continue to exist - certainly not somewhere else, say on a ‘higher plane’, and emphatically not in any ‘heaven’. But equally we are unable to say they do not exist. Suffering simply does not exist for them. That is all. What more should we (or they) want? Note also - and this is important - that ‘*nirvāṇa*’ is not used here to refer to some ultimate *reality*. It is rather the highest *achievement*.

### 4. Way

The way to achieve *nirvāṇa* is declared by the Buddha in his Four Noble Truths to be the famous ‘**Eightfold Path of the Noble Ones**’. It is said to be the ‘middle way’ between hedonistic self-indulgence and excessive and fruitless asceticism. The eight dimensions of this path consist of:

- (i) Appropriate (or 'right', throughout) view
- (ii) Appropriate intention
- (iii) Appropriate speech
- (iv) Appropriate action
- (v) Appropriate livelihood
- (vi) Appropriate effort
- (vii) Appropriate mindfulness
- (viii) Appropriate concentration

The first of these is explained as *seeing* the truth of the Four Noble Truths, and acting in conformity with it. 'Appropriate *intention*' is explained as intentions free from attachments to worldly pleasures, selfishness, and self-possessiveness, and animated by benevolence and compassion towards all living creatures. 'Appropriate *speech*' is speech that is not false, divisive, hurtful, or merely idle chatter. 'Appropriate *action*' is refraining from harming living beings, particularly through killing them, refraining from taking what is not given, and refraining from sexual misconduct. In the case of monks and nuns this means refraining from all sexual activity. 'Appropriate *livelihood*' is explained as livelihood not involving the infringement of appropriate speech and appropriate action. Some sources refer to five kinds of trade particularly inappropriate for lay Buddhists (let alone monks and nuns): trade in arms, human beings, flesh, intoxicating drinks (presumably also other 'recreational' drugs), and poison. 'Appropriate *effort*' consists of effort to prevent the arising of unwholesome mental states (e.g. of greed, hatred, and delusion) that have not arisen and effort to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen. It is effort to arouse wholesome states (e.g. of nonattachment and altruism, loving-kindness, and wisdom) that have not arisen, and effort to develop and promote wholesome states that have arisen. 'Appropriate *mindfulness*' is constant mindfulness, awareness, with reference to the body, with reference to feelings, with reference to the mind, and with reference to physical and mental processes. In watching these one is aware of their flowing nature, moments arising and falling, aware of their impermanence and aware of letting them go. In watching in this way one perceives them as they are, and abandons any notion that they might be worth craving, as capable of providing lasting happiness, or as an object of attachment as one's true Self. In knowing, seeing the body, feelings, the mind, and physical and mental processes as they are, one begins to erode any

basis for craving, and thus the forces that power suffering and rebirth. ‘Appropriate *concentration*’ consists of onepointedness of mind, the mind focussing unwaveringly on a single object, which can be taken to the point where one can use this ability to attain very advanced stages of meditation (see below).

### **The teaching of not-Self**

So far I have spoken about the Four Noble Truths, as elaborated in the *Discourse Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma*. According to tradition the Buddha followed up this initial discourse with another one, known as the *Discourse on the Definition of Not-Self* (P: *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*). In this discourse (P: *sutta*; S: *sūtra*) the Buddha outlined his famous (perhaps ‘notorious’) teaching of ‘not-Self’ (P: *anattā*; S: *anātman*). This is the central dimension of ‘seeing things the way they really are’, the discovery that really made the Buddha the Awakened One, and that Buddhists hold distinguishes his teaching from all other non-Buddhist teachings.

The Buddha’s teaching of not-Self is sometimes presented in books as a teaching of ‘no soul’. The Buddha, it is said, completely denied the existence of a soul. This interpretation should be resisted. The notion of the ‘soul’ is a complex one theologically and philosophically. It is closely bound up with issues concerning postmortem survival. The Buddha certainly did not hold that death is the end. He taught reincarnation, although he had a very particular explanation of how reincarnation occurs. But the Buddha did not know of the (largely ‘Western’) discussions and concerns relating to the soul. When the Buddha taught *anātman* he was talking about the existence or otherwise of a very particular sort of thing, and that thing is best understood not as the soul, but as the *Self*.

This is a difficult topic, and one way or another it forms the centrepiece of Buddhist philosophy, which is notorious for its subtlety and complexity. But the main point can be stated reasonably clearly: My Self, if there were one, would be the real me, what I truly am. Now, the Buddha says, take the case of physical things - say, my body and all the physical things around me. Physical things (called in technical Buddhist terminology ‘form’) cannot be my Self. Rather, form is not-Self. It leads to suffering (‘affliction’), and moreover the Buddha points out that we have no control over it. It is also impermanent. If physical things were my Self, the real me, they would not

lead to suffering, I would have control over them, they would not be impermanent. And the same could be said for four other categories of events that make me up, or that I am involved in: feelings, perceptions, other mental events like intentions, and even consciousness itself.<sup>4</sup> Each of these categories of events consists of events that are not-Self. Since they are not-Self, the Buddha concludes, we should ‘become dispassionate’ towards them, let them go, cut at the very root any craving for them.

The impermanence of physical events and things, of feelings, perceptions, other mental events like intentions, and consciousness itself - and hence their unsatisfactory nature, and our need to let go of them - is stressed repeatedly in Buddhist thought from the earliest times, with elaborate discussions of just how impermanent they are. Meditating systematically and deeply on it forms the central element of the ‘insight’ meditation that, when developed to its highest and most intense degree, cuts once and for all the forces of ignorance and hence craving that power, rebirth and suffering. But the question remains whether the Buddha thought there is nevertheless something else in addition to these which does not lead to suffering, which one does have control over, and which is permanent and hence is genuinely worth calling my Self. The overwhelming weight of Mainstream Buddhist tradition is that there is not.<sup>5</sup> In other words, ‘seeing things the way they really are’, attaining nirvāṇa and putting a complete stop to all suffering precisely involves letting go of all ideas of Self. The teaching of not-Self is also a teaching of no Self at all. There is no place for a permanent Self in all of this.

### **Life after death**

What has all this to do with life after death? What happens at death, if there is no Self? Mainstream Buddhist tradition considers that the issue of life after death, and the issue of the existence or otherwise of a Self, need have nothing directly to do with each other (even if we are often inclined to think they do). Just as in my present life I might think I have a Self, an unchanging thing called the real Me, but actually I am a continuum, an ever-changing and largely uncontrolled stream, of physical events, of feelings, perceptions, other mental events like intentions, and consciousness, so when I die my physical events (‘form’) cease. But the other four classes of mental events continue, ever-changing, and they contain within them the ‘residual traces’ of my previous mental acts (*karma*) of greed, hatred and ignorance (or ‘delusion’),

or their opposites, that powered my physical actions when I was alive. In accordance with these, as appropriate, a new body is formed. In other words, 'I' am reincarnated. And I can be reincarnated not just as a human being, in either pleasant or unpleasant circumstances. Appropriate to the dominant forces of virtuous or vicious former acts, I may be reborn in a hell, as an animal, as a 'hungry ghost', as a human, as a sort of mighty titan or 'anti-god', or as a 'god'. The order here is in general from greater to lesser suffering. A 'god' is not God. It is a form of rebirth, perhaps best thought of for our purposes here on the model of the old Graeco-Roman gods and goddesses, in appropriately divine comfort. Since these are all types of rebirth, in accordance with previous acts (*karma*), when the force of the acts that led to the rebirth runs out, death occurs and then rebirth elsewhere. This goes on throughout all eternity unless enlightenment is attained, putting a stop to the whole process.

It follows from all of this that the relationship between the one who dies and the reborn being is one of 'neither the same nor different'. They are clearly not the same person (my reincarnation as a cockroach would not be *me*). But they are not completely different, since the reincarnation is the result of causal forces (*karma*) made (in part) by me. If we think of all our incarnations as a river, my reincarnation is a later stage of the river or, as Buddhists say, of 'my' continuum. None of this is thought to require a creator God. Reincarnation is due to a totally impersonal process of *causation*. The causes that bring all this about do not need reference to God. Efficient causes bring about results, quite automatically. That is all. The chain of causes stretches back infinitely into the past and, unless there is enlightenment, the chain will stretch infinitely into the future as well.

### [The Saṃgha](#)

The Buddha established an order of monks and nuns to create the optimum facilities for practising his path, and to preserve his teachings, as well as to teach the wider community the way of virtue that will lead to welfare in future (through 'good karma') and perhaps even enlightenment. Buddhism does not hold that only monks and nuns can attain enlightenment, and we have the names of a number of lay people who eventually became enlightened. Nevertheless, the order of monks and nuns is absolutely central to Buddhism, and historically the principal religious function of the Buddhist



laity has always rested in the material support they can give to the monks and nuns who, in theory at least, are required to obtain their food through alms. In return, it is felt that the presence of monks and nuns can give positive benefits to the wider lay community through their teaching, their example of piety and serious Buddhist practice, and crucially through the way they serve as a 'merit-field', a means of 'making merit' through such acts as donations to the order that will lead (through 'good karma' again) to improved welfare in this life and in future lives for the donors. Between the monks and nuns on the one hand, and the wider lay community, there is in Buddhist societies a reciprocal relationship (in their different and appropriate ways) of welfare, care and affection.

To the Buddha himself is attributed the many monastic rules and regulations that are contained within what is now a written Buddhist Canon. The Canon consists of three sections, and hence it is known as the 'Three Baskets' (*Tripitaka*). The section concerning matters relating broadly to monastic code is known as the *Vinaya*. The other sections are the *Sūtras*, discourses attributed in the main to the Buddha himself, and the 'Higher Teaching' (*Abhidharma*) relating in particular to issues of philosophical and psychological analysis, composed and assembled probably significantly later than the time of the Buddha himself.

### **Schisms over monastic identity**

In the centuries after the death of the Buddha various schisms occurred. Schisms in Buddhism (*saughabheda*; literally 'splitting of the Saṃgha') do not occur over *doctrinal* differences but rather over differences in the *monastic rule*. So, for example, one of the first schisms is said to have been incited in particular by a suggestion that it was legitimate for monks to handle money. If one group insists on allowing this, while another does not, and there can be no reconciliation, then the two groups have to separate. They can no longer live together. Eventually their monastic regulations will reflect this difference, and a monk ordained in one or the other will be a monk of *that* tradition, rather than *the other* tradition. Thus we come to speak of a Theravāda monk, or a Mūlasarvāstivāda monk, or a Dharmaguptaka monk, or a monk of one of many other monastic traditions. Each of these refers to a monk ordained according to that particular Vinaya tradition. All Tibetan monks are Mūlasarvāstivāda monks. Chinese monks, for example, tend to be

Dharmaguptaka monks. Particularly interesting and important are the Theravāda monks. These are, broadly speaking, the Buddhists of e.g. Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and other countries of South East Asia as well as those countries to which Theravāda Buddhism has spread (including now, of course, the West). While it is not a certain way of identification, generally Theravāda monks can be recognised, for example, by their shaven heads and orange, yellow, or brownish robes. One reason for their importance is that the Theravāda is the only Buddhist tradition that preserves its Canon in an ancient Indian language (Pali) akin to that which was spoken by the Buddha himself. Tibetan monks, for example, use Tibetan translations. Chinese monks use Chinese translations. Moreover while Buddhism was lost in mainland India from about the fourteenth century (to be reintroduced in modern times), Theravāda Buddhism continued within the Indian sphere in Sri Lanka for example. Theravāda Buddhism would claim unproblematically to be the original Buddhism taught by the Buddha and, while scholars nowadays do indeed find this problematic, certainly Theravāda Buddhism is more often than not closest in day-to-day practice and belief to the Mainstream Buddhism that I have portrayed above. Mūlasarvāstivāda monks in Tibet, or Dharmaguptaka monks in China, for example, in addition to sharing Mainstream Buddhism, have *also* tended to adopt ideas and practices contained originally in a vast corpus of discourses that are attributed to the Buddha but considered by others, including almost invariably. Theravāda monks, to be apocryphal - the [\*Mahāyāna sūtras\*](#). These are important.

### **Becoming a Buddhist monk**

How does one become a monk in the Theravāda tradition? There are two stages, corresponding to a novice and a fully-ordained monk. The postulant first goes through a ceremony called ‘going forth’. This is possible at the age of about seven or eight. After this he is a novice. The ceremony involves reciting the ‘Triple Refuge’ (in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṃgha) in the presence of a full monk of at least ten years standing, and taking ten precepts. These precepts include the five basic precepts that (it is hoped) all good Buddhists will adhere to: (i) to refrain from harming living creatures; (ii) to refrain from taking what is not given; (iii) to refrain from all sexual activity (this would obviously be modified for a lay person); (iv) to refrain from false speech; and (v) to refrain from intoxicants that cause heedlessness.

Additional precepts are specific to the monastic situation. Hair is shaved, and the novice now dresses in orange robes. To become a full monk the novice must be at least twenty. The ceremony requires at least five full monks of ten years standing. Possessions are henceforth (at least traditionally) to be few (in one list eight: three robes, alms-bowl, razor, needle, belt and water-strainer). One's life is governed by the 227 rules of a monk (in the Theravāda version). The four breaches that would involve expulsion are: 1) Sexual intercourse; 2) Taking what is not given; 3) Killing another human being; and 4) Falsely laying claim to spiritual attainments. Other breaches, depending on seriousness, might involve, a period of suspension of full status within the Saṃgha, or some penalty decided by the Saṃgha, or simply confession. Note, incidentally, that in Buddhism monastic vows need not be taken for life. It is not at all abnormal for a monk to decide to renounce the monastic state. In some countries a man might become a monk for a period of just a few months in the summer, as a sort of 'retreat holiday'. Other monks spend time as forest-dwellers engaged in intensive meditation and living a more austere life than the monastic norm (adopting, say, the twelve or thirteen 'ascetic practices', such as wearing robes made of rags from the dust-heap).

Buddhist tradition tends to see the monastic Saṃgha as the prerequisite for the establishment and flourishing of Buddhism in a country or society. The monastic rules (such as a rule - at least in the Theravāda tradition - against handling money) force members of the Saṃgha to exist in dependence upon the lay community. Rules also aim to ensure that a monk or nun is approved of by the laity (seen as 'pure'), since unless the broader lay community sees the Saṃgha as pure people they will not want to offer donations to it and the Saṃgha would hence perish. In ancient times when kings became themselves lay supporters of the Saṃgha it sometimes happened that effectively Buddhism was given official state support, although even then royal patronage was not necessarily given exclusively to Buddhism. Equally, the Saṃgha could become involved in supporting the state, and everyday politics, even to the extent of supporting war against enemies of the state who were also (or thus) seen as enemies of Buddhism.

While there are records of enlightened women in ancient times, the order of fully-ordained nuns has died out in the Theravāda tradition of South Asia, and also in Tibetan Buddhism. Fully ordained nuns are now generally only found within the monastic traditions of East Asian Buddhism (such as Chinese Buddhism). In modern times however there has been some attempt

to reintroduce the order of fully-ordained nuns into other parts of the Buddhist world.

### **Buddhist meditation**

The forces that lead to ‘unenlightenment’ (*saṃsāra*) are greed, hatred and ignorance or delusion. These are essentially mental, and therefore becoming enlightened involves working on the mind to transform it in a very deep way. This is pre-eminently through meditation. In its broadest sense meditation in Buddhism has two facets (or perhaps ‘stages’): 1) calming the mind down, sometimes translated as ‘calm abiding’; and 2) using the calm mind to see deeply and in a transformative manner the way things really are. This second facet is known as ‘insight’ meditation.

### **Calming meditation**

Calming meditation presupposes such prerequisites as faith in the teaching of the Buddha, and participation in regular Buddhist ethics and religious practice. The first stage is narrowing one’s attention through concentrated focussing of the mind, becoming simply - but unwaveringly - aware of the mind’s object. Texts list various possible objects of concentration. For example the important Theravāda manual, the *Visuddhimagga* (‘*Path of Purity*’; 5th century AD), speaks of forty types of objects. These can be divided into three groups: a) those - such as a coloured disc - suitable for people dominated by hatred; b) those suitable for people dominated by greed, such as a skeleton; or c) those suitable for people dominated by delusion. Commonly, focussed awareness (= ‘mindfulness’) of the process of breathing is recommended for delusion although particularly in recent centuries mindfulness of breathing has become a general practice recommended for all those beginning meditation as a way to overcome the mind’s natural inability to concentrate. Another object for meditation, particularly recommended for those dominated by hatred, is the ‘four divine abidings’, also known as the ‘four immeasurables’. This practice involves developing all-pervading loving-kindness - ‘may all sentient beings be well and happy’ - all pervading compassion - ‘may all sentient beings be free of suffering’ - all pervading sympathetic joy - delight in the happiness of others - and all pervading equanimity. The meditator is exhorted to overcome while meditating the five

hindrances: sensual desire, ill will, tiredness and sleepiness, excitement and depression, and doubt.

### **Insight meditation**

Insight meditation involves bringing about a state of meditative absorption where the object of meditation is not one of the above, but rather the way things really are. This is understood in terms of suffering, impermanence, and not-Self, and their ramifications. Through this, one attains ‘wisdom’ (S: *prajñā*; P: *paññā*), the state of mind where one sees things the way they really are. Developed to its deepest degree this will cut the forces that lead to rebirth. Hence there will be liberation, enlightenment - nirvāṇa.

### **Mahāyāna**

Mahāyāna represents the biggest internal development within Buddhism. We have texts dating in origin initially from perhaps the second or first century BC claiming to be the word of the Buddha - thus claiming to be sūtras that advocate a vision calling itself *Mahāyāna* (the ‘Great Vehicle’, or perhaps the ‘Vehicle leading to the Great’). In the light of this, those who refuse to accept this Mahāyāna vision come to be termed (by those who advocate the Mahāyāna) followers of a *Hīnayāna* - an Inferior Vehicle (or the ‘Vehicle leading to the Inferior’).<sup>6</sup>

In the past there was a tendency among scholars to see Mahāyāna as the result of some sort of major schism, but what evidence we have suggests that in ancient India it was not like this at all. Followers of each perspective might sometimes be found living harmoniously in the same monastery. As we have seen, schism in Buddhism is a matter of monastic rule. We know Mahāyāna did not originate in a dispute over monastic rule, but is rather a matter of different visions of what should be the final concern and goal of the Buddhist practitioner. Mahāyāna hence was not the result of any schism. Followers who did not adopt the Mahāyāna approach seem more often than not to have viewed the Mahāyāna with some scorn, as full of fabrications based on false claims of authenticity for the Mahāyāna sūtras. These discourses attributed to the Buddha were and are thus apocryphal - they are not accepted as authentic by all Buddhist traditions. Those who did accept some or all of them as authentic, and hence too the teachings within them, eventually came to see

themselves as followers of a Great Vehicle, the Mahāyāna. Nowadays Buddhists who would accept the apocryphal Mahāyāna scriptures, and would advocate the Mahāyāna vision as embodying their highest aspirations, are likely to be found among Buddhists in Tibet, China, Japan, Korea and, of course, among Buddhists in the West.

What is Mahāyāna? Followers of Mahāyāna portray it rather as a *vision* of what Buddhism is finally all about, based on one's *motivation* for engaging in the spiritual path. The highest motivation, the Mahāyāna motivation, is *to become not just enlightened but actually a perfect Buddha out of compassion for the benefit of all sentient beings*. Compared with this, any other motivation (such as simply aiming for the ending of one's own suffering, i.e. simply aiming for nirvāṇa) is inferior, that is, a Hīnayāna. Mahāyāna thus consists of a vision of what Buddhism is finally all about, expressed in terms of compassion, embarking on the path to become a perfect Buddha in order to help all sentient beings and not just aiming to bring to an end *one's own* suffering. We should all embark on this path. That is, we should all take the vow of a *bodhisattva*. This is the technical term used to refer to one who has vowed, and is actually engaging in the path, to become a perfect Buddha, for the simple reason that it is the best way in order to help most perfectly others. Thus we should all follow the same long path that Śākyamuni took benefiting many others on the way, rather than seeking simply to bring to an end our own suffering as quickly as possible. That long path is said to take three incalculable aeons of rebirths, gradually developing in wisdom and compassion, from first vowing to become a perfect Buddha to actually achieving the goal. Hence, in the light of this compassion, immediate freedom from rebirth ceases to be the most important aim and concern.

### **Mahāyāna and the Buddha**

Possibly one central feature of early Mahāyāna is the idea that the Buddha is still present, and can thus be contacted in meditation (and even, in some later developments, in prayer). He is still here because of his great compassion (meaning he would not abandon suffering humanity after just eighty years or so), and his superhuman abilities (meaning he could put off death, perhaps forever). He is still present on another plane, known as 'Pure Land.' Since throughout infinite time there must have been infinite Buddhas, and Buddhas do not abandon their flock, there must be many (indeed infinite) other

compassionate Buddhas still around too, each present in their own individual Pure Lands.

Hence the Buddha is still teaching, and perhaps inspiring new texts and even new practices to suit changed circumstances. With acceptance of the idea that the Buddha is still around, everything changes. It becomes possible not only to receive new teachings, but also to pray to the Buddha and receive help from him out of his great compassion. The Buddha is now defined in terms not only of his wisdom - his insight into the way things really are - but also crucially in terms of his compassion. Hence the Buddha helps sentient beings in all kinds of different ways, ranging from spiritual ways to also granting even ordinary mundane material benefits.

### **A Buddha's three dimensions**

As Mahāyāna thought on the nature of the Buddha evolved, the doctrinal view eventually developed that there are three aspects or dimensions (*kāya*)<sup>2</sup> to a Buddha. The topic is a complicated one. Here is a simplified and not too inaccurate explanation:

1. *Dharmakāya*: The 'dharma-dimension', what we might call a Buddha's real dimension or aspect. This is the Buddha seen in terms of the way things really are. It is what he (like all of us) *really* is, and what as an enlightened person he really wants us to understand. In other words it is simply the Truth, the final true nature of things itself, spoken of (if you like, 'personified') as a dimension or aspect of the Buddha himself.

2. The 'Dimension of Communal Enjoyment': Unlike the *Dharmakāya*, which is in a way abstract (it doesn't *appear*, it cannot have a shape, for example), the 'Dimension of Communal Enjoyment' is the actual magnificent appearance of the Buddha in his Pure Land. The Pure Land is a higher plane, in which the Buddha sits on his lotus throne teaching the Doctrine to an assembly consisting (perhaps mainly) of advanced bodhisattvas. It is possible for those who are sufficiently advanced in meditation to visit him there, and receive teachings from him. Note, however, that there are many such Buddhas - indeed an infinite number.

3. The 'Dimension of Magical Transformation': A Buddha magically

emanates numerous ‘dimensions (or ‘aspects’, or perhaps ‘appearances’) of ‘magical transformation’, in whatever form is necessary to help sentient beings on any plane. Thus for the Mahāyāna ‘our’ historical Buddha, Śākyamuni Buddha, was in a way just a helpful fiction, just an appearance, a magical emanation from a Buddha on a higher plane, an emanation from a Buddha seen himself as a ‘Dimension of Communal Enjoyment’ (i.e. the second Dimension, above).

Followers of the bodhisattva path (the Mahāyāna) for the benefit of others are encouraged themselves to gain miraculous abilities (the various magical powers often thought to accompany developed ability in meditation) in order to help others. Eventually very advanced bodhisattvas came to be given names - like Avalokiteśvara, later referred to as ‘*the* bodhisattva of compassion’, or Mañjuśrī, ‘*the* bodhisattva of wisdom’ - and also take on the status of supramundane helpers (sometimes referred to in books as ‘celestial bodhisattvas’). Thus in Mahāyāna we find not only many kind and compassionate Buddhas still existing and willing to help, but also great advanced bodhisattvas who similarly can help those who have recourse to them. It is explained that this is possible because these Buddhas and bodhisattvas, by virtue of their status, have such great stocks of merit - resulting from their vast deeds of virtue over so many lifetimes - that they can transfer some of their merit to others. Such Buddhas and bodhisattvas form the central themes of Mahāyāna Buddhist art.



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## HOW IS A CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN TO APPROACH BUDDHISM?

### Nostra Aetate

Buddhism is not a strange cult. It is one of the great world religions, and Buddhists - whether they are from traditionally Buddhist cultures or Western converts - are often deeply moral and spiritual people. One only needs to think of perhaps the world's most famous Buddhist, the Dalai Lama of Tibet.

In what follows I want to offer some initial reflections on Buddhism as a former Buddhist and now a Roman Catholic Christian. Our framework has to be that of the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*:

“Buddhism in its multiple forms acknowledges the radical insufficiency of this shifting world. It teaches a path by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, can either reach a state of absolute freedom [enlightenment] or attain supreme enlightenment [perfect Buddhahood] by their own efforts or by higher assistance... The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in [Buddhism]. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (*Jn* 14:6), in whom men find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself” (cf. *2 Co* 5:8-19 parentheses added).

Nevertheless, to avoid misunderstandings, this should be read alongside the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, issued in 2000 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under the then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger:

“With the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument for the salvation of *all* humanity (cf. *Ac* 17:30-31). This truth of faith does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for all the religions of the world, but at the same time, it rules out, in a radical way, that mentality of indifferentism ‘characterized by a

religious relativism which leads to the belief that “one religion is as good as another”.’ If it is true that followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation” (para 33).

It seems clear that Buddhism, of all the great world religions, at its best and at the most must be understood in the light of the statement of the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*:

“Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the gospel. She regards such qualities as given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life” (para 16).

*Nostra Aetate* (sect. 2) exhorts Catholics ‘prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life [to] acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture.’ And as Pope John Paul II has pointed out, it was the intention of the Fathers of Vatican II that the Church should identify the ‘seeds of the word’ (*semina Verbi*) in other religions ‘in order to trace a common path against the backdrop of the needs of the contemporary world ... the Holy Spirit works effectively even outside the visible structure of the Church.’

There are indeed things in Buddhism that can validly be seen as ‘preparations for the gospel’ even if, as with the famous statement of Augustine (*Confessions* 1:1), ‘you [God] made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you’. So dialogue with Buddhists needs to seek for and appreciate the Christ-inspired truth in the precepts and doctrines of Buddhism. The austerity and beauty of Buddhist moral and spiritual cultivation, Buddhist appreciation of the inadequacies of this passing world, even some Buddhist doctrinal positions (such as the compassionate benevolent and salvific role of Buddhas and bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna) can all be understood and welcomed by Catholic Christians.

## [Dialogue](#)

I want to draw brief attention here, by way of just one example, to an area of Buddhism where Christians have in the past found a particularly interesting foundation for exploration and dialogue. This is the Mahāyāna Buddhism of the great Japanese Buddhist Shinran (1173-1262). It is of especial interest to us because while remaining totally within Buddhist tradition Shinran also gives interesting critical comments on some salient features of Buddhism. At the same time he offers some stimulating meeting points for Christian-Buddhist dialogue.

Shinran followed a tradition that is sometimes known in English as ‘Pure Land Buddhism’. Numerically it is the most widely followed form of Buddhism in Japan. The starting point is the sheer difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of practising the Buddhist path of virtue and spiritual growth in the world as it is now, particularly as it is bereft of a Buddha in the world here and now who can directly teach us. But of course there are still Buddhas available in their Pure Lands. Thus it was reasoned that it makes sense so to practise Buddhism that in one’s next life one will be reborn in a Pure Land where, able to study with its resident Buddha, enlightenment is sure to be obtained. In particular, Pure Land Buddhism relies on a tradition that goes back to Indian sources and was much developed in China, that aims for rebirth in the Pure Land of a Buddha known as *Amitābha* (‘Infinite Light’). This Buddha, and his Pure Land (*Sukhāvatī* - the ‘Happy Place’), are thought to provide particularly suitable conditions for attaining enlightenment.

Important to Shinran is a particular version of a Mahāyāna doctrine that originated in India but is known in its East Asian form as the ‘Buddha Nature’ doctrine. This teaching developed in answer to the question: ‘What is it about sentient beings (beings with consciousness) that enables them to become, and to remain forever, enlightened Buddhas?’ The answer was that ‘all sentient beings possess (or in one version ‘are’) the Buddha Nature.’ But what is this Buddha Nature? Eventually it was reasoned (at least in some circles, and very influentially in East Asia) that the Buddha Nature must be the deepest level of consciousness.<sup>8</sup> And one is able to ‘become’ enlightened, and enlightenment will never cease, because the Buddha Nature itself is of the very nature of unchanging radiant enlightenment. Like a sky that is never really obscured by clouds, the Buddha Nature never was really obscured by ignorant delusion. It was always radiant, unchangeably liberated. To ‘become’ enlightened nothing has to be done, nothing has to be changed. One simply has to be what one always really was. Deep within our own minds is

and always was and will be the eternally enlightened Buddha Nature. The 'process of becoming enlightened' is not a process of bringing anything about as regards changing the Buddha Nature itself.

Shinran combined such a Buddha Nature view of enlightenment - our 'Buddha Nature' within us is unconditioned, pure, absolute, eternally enlightened, beyond all conceptuality - with a rigorously determinist view of human nature. Hence he concluded that nothing we ourselves can do will ever actually lead us to enlightenment. It simply cannot be done. Attempts to follow the Buddhist path as a means of bringing about enlightenment only enmesh one more and more deeply in egoism, in selfishness. We are incapable of doing a nonegoistic act, and thus quite incapable of ever acting like (and hence being) a Buddha. Enlightenment is only possible by truly, completely, letting go of any attempt to bring it about, and relying on the infinite merits of Buddha Amitābha. We rely not on our 'own-power' but on the 'other-power' of Amitābha. Really letting go in this way - not as yet another strategy of own-power, but from truly realizing one cannot do it for oneself - Shinran calls *shinjin*. This is commonly translated as 'faith', but it is faith as an act of complete letting-go, complete entrusting. Such a deep letting-go allows the other-power deep within us to do what it has always been doing, to shine-forth through us free of the obscurations of one's own selfish interference. In other words, the 'other-power', Buddha Amitābha, is in reality nothing other than the Buddha Nature, the deepest always-enlightened level of one's own consciousness. But here it is realized that this deepest enlightened level of consciousness cannot be said to be *one's own* at all.

For Shinran, when *shinjin* truly occurs one is saved. All the selfish forces that might power reincarnation are dropped. Thus at death it is not really true that one is reborn in the Pure Land, there to become enlightened in the presence of Amitābha. The Pure Land is itself really the state of Buddhahood. At death there is enlightenment, as there always was. It is as simple as that.

And while still living we can only hymn forth our gratitude to Amitābha - who has already saved everyone, if only they are willing to let-go and trust in him - in the *nembutsu*. This is the utterance *Namu Amida Butsu* ('Reverence to Amitābha Buddha'), often repeated incessantly but not, of course, as a *means* of salvation. There are no means to enlightenment. But we are saved nevertheless. For that we can only be grateful to Amitābha.

## **Christian - Buddhist monastic interchange**

In recent years there has been close and valuable interchange between Christian and Buddhist monasteries. Abbot Christopher Jamison of Worth Abbey observes that 'the monastic life of celibacy and prayer is strikingly similar in the Catholic and Buddhist traditions,' and he speaks of the warm friendship that exists between the Benedictine monks of Worth and the monks at the English Buddhist monastery of Chithurst. He adds nevertheless that while '[w]e have good dialogues...we recognise that there are differences as well as similarities between us. We Benedictines are Christian believers and so to understand us fully requires an understanding of the teachings of Christ.' In further monastic dialogue and exploration, Buddhist monks have sometimes stayed particularly with Benedictines, and Christian monks have visited Buddhist monasteries in e.g. India and Japan. In reflecting together on their shared experience as monks in the modern world Buddhists and Christians have come to a far greater appreciation than might have been otherwise of what they have in common and what they can together witness and offer to the modern world notwithstanding some very deep and significant differences. Some have found in Christian mysticism a point of contact with Buddhists. Thomas Merton, for example, who just before he died visited Buddhists in India and South East Asia (he died in Bangkok), enjoyed many dialogues with Buddhists, particularly on the practice of meditation. He clearly found numerous meeting points with his Buddhist partners. Pope John Paul II himself invited Buddhist leaders to his interfaith meetings in Assisi to pray for peace.

### **Key differences**

Having said this, we should also address significant differences between Buddhist approaches and those we consider, as Catholics, to be true. It is common nowadays to want to stress similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, perhaps to the extent of urging similarities and even identity where they are patently lacking. I concentrate here on differences deliberately, for it was an awareness of fundamental differences and hence the need (in grace) to make a choice and to take responsibility for that choice that brought me after over twenty years as a Buddhist to convert to Catholicism. We need to be clear that Buddhism and Catholic Christianity,

while they have many features in common - and for all the wonderful virtues of Buddhism - are also fundamentally different in ways that are not incidental but are absolutely central and crucial to the religions concerned. Reflection on these differences might help both Christians and Buddhists, who have in fact made choices, to be clear about what choices they have actually made.

## God

Buddhism is all about the mind, not God. As we have seen, in practising Buddhism one never finds talk of God, there is no role in practising Buddhism for God, and it is not difficult to find in Buddhist texts attacks on the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, all-good Creator of the universe.

When I was a Buddhist, taking part in Christian-Buddhist dialogue I was often particularly struck by the fact that no matter how much I insisted that Buddhists do not believe in God - indeed Buddhists consider not accepting or needing God a positive sign of Buddhist superiority - some of my Christian friends kept insisting that they do really (although perhaps preferring a 'negative way' to God). I had the same experience recently, now as a Christian, in dialogue both with a Buddhist scholar and also a Christian theologian. I held that Buddhists do not believe in God; the Buddhist scholar assured me that Buddhists do not believe in God, and that he himself does not believe in God. But the Christian theologian insisted that they do.

It is not tolerance, nor is it broadmindedness, to insist that the other person really holds the same view as you do. Soon after being received into the Catholic Church I had a brief correspondence with a nun who thought that I might want to join a group for Christian-Buddhist meditation. She confessed that she had occasionally considered becoming a Buddhist, but she 'needed the personal aspect'. I am not sure quite what she meant by this, but I take it that she thought the Buddhist denial of God is based on accepting some sort of impersonal Absolute, with the notion of a personal God - who Christ called His 'Father' - an accommodation to one's *needs*. The difference for her between a Buddhist denial of God and the God of Christianity is simply one of *one's own individual needs*.

Now, the idea that really there is some sort of blank impersonal Absolute, and thinking of God as a loving Creator is simply a matter of one's own needs (perhaps for love), is not really found in Buddhism. It is in fact a version of the Hindu tradition known as Advaita Vedānta. It is irrelevant to

the issue of God, the actual living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God whom Our Blessed Lord called His Father, the God of Catholic tradition, of St Thomas Aquinas and, say, of the Catholic *Catechism*. It would not be normal in Buddhism to teach the existence ‘for one’s needs’, of a loving creator God. To think there is such a thing would usually be taken as a paradigmatic example of what Buddhists call a ‘wrong view’. And from a Christian point of view the idea that between Buddhist denial and Christian affirmation of God there is no difference except one’s own needs is (it seems to me) an appalling and worrying misunderstanding of Christian truth as well as Buddhism. For orthodox Christianity God, the actual living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God whom Our Blessed Lord called His Father, the God of Catholic tradition, of St Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic *Catechism*, is not purely a matter of *my needs*. In Himself, God is nothing to do with ‘me’ and ‘my wants’. God is *God*. One is reminded here of something C.S. Lewis says in his *Miracles*:

“An ‘impersonal God’ - well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads - better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap - best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband - that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a *real* footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (‘Man’s search for God!’) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to *that!* Worse still, supposing He had found us?”

As Buddhist doctrine developed, questions concerning what does and does not really exist *did* lead sometimes to the affirmation of the real, essential and fundamental existence of nirvāṇa. Further, questions about how it is that something that is produced from a cause can be permanent - will never cease - *did* lead in some circles to the affirmation of nirvāṇa as an ‘unconditioned phenomenon’. But nirvāṇa as an ‘unconditioned phenomenon’ in this sense has nothing to do with some sort of ‘negative path’ (*via negativa*) leading to an Ultimate Reality that some have wanted to think of as ‘the Buddhist name for God’. And the idea of nirvāṇa creating the world, for example, is in Buddhism a complete absurdity. Hence it makes no sense to talk of *gratitude* to nirvāṇa, or our existential dependence on nirvāṇa, and certainly not

worshipping nirvāṇa, or a *personal loving relationship* with nirvāṇa, or nirvāṇa as our Father. Nirvāṇa is to be realised by each person individually, not worshipped.

### **Buddhist rejection of loving Creator**

Let us consider God as a *loving Creator*. God is not necessarily a Creator. There was no necessity about God creating anything. God wasn't compelled to create. But given there are things, God is the answer to the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' If there are things, then we as Christians argue that there is this fundamental *causal* question to which 'God' is the answer. Buddhism is very interested in causality, and yet this causal question 'Why is there something *at all*, at *any* time, rather than nothing?' is never asked, and hence never answered, within Buddhism. Everything is simply the result of its own natural causes - the tree from the seed, the baby from its parents, and so on to infinity. The fact that natural causal processes in Buddhism include moral causation - virtuous causes bring about good (pleasant) results, vicious causes bad (unpleasant) results, in accordance with karma - just is the way it always is and must be. There is no additional reason for it being that way rather than not.

Indeed from the beginning Buddhists have attacked the very notion of a Creator - loving or otherwise - as unnecessary, contradictory and absurd.<sup>9</sup> Buddhists have been proud of their denial of a Creator. In teachings attributed to the Buddha himself, in some of the very earliest of Buddhist texts, there is a mocking attempt - undoubtedly intended as a joke - to explain the origins of the notion of a creator God. The idea of a Creator springs from an elementary and foolish confusion on the part not only of his worshippers, but also on the part of 'God' himself. Buddhism accepts no first beginning to the process of unenlightened rebirth. But it does accept the Indian notion of 'cosmic cycles', an endless series of cosmic evolution, collapse, and devolution. All this occurs due to impersonal causal processes. At the beginning of the current cosmic cycle a sentient being, due entirely to karmic causes relating to previous deluded deeds, was reborn in a sort-of heaven. This was Brahmā. He was there all by himself. And he felt jolly lonely. So he thought to himself that it would be lovely if there were some company. At that very moment other beings, also due to karmic causes, were born around him. He thus inferred that he must have created them solely by wishing that they should be



there. They, for their part, assumed that since he was there already, by himself, he must have created them. Thus Brahmā came to be worshipped as the creator God. But actually, of course, there is no creator God. All happened due to impersonal causes, based on previous karma.

In another of these early attempts to mock the creator God, a monk travels to visit Brahmā's heaven to ask him a question. Brahmā simply keeps repeating, 'I, brother, am Brahmā, Great Brahmā, the Supreme Being, the Unsurpassed, the Chief, the Victor, the Ruler, the Father of all beings who have been or are to be.' The monk, receiving no answer to his specific question, eventually gets quite fed up. Whereupon Brahmā takes him on one side and explains that actually he, Great Brahmā, has not the faintest idea what the answer to the monk's question is. But Brahmā does not want to be seen by his worshippers to be ignorant, since they think he knows everything. Truly, if the monk really wants to know the answer to his question he should return and ask the Buddha. He is the one who truly knows.

But for a Christian who is remotely traditional, who believes in the God of the Bible and of the Catholic *Catechism*, God as our Creator is essential to our understanding of who God is and what is owed to Him. It is not an incidental extra to Christianity - it is what Christianity is all about. If God as Creator were lacking, our religion would be destroyed. In Buddhism there is no God as Creator. Hence Buddhism is radically different from Christianity in ways that really count. A more important difference it would be hard to imagine.

### **Reincarnation - no hope for the individual<sup>10</sup>**

It was while working on a paper called 'Altruism and rebirth' (in Williams (1998)) that, for the first time, I think I truly appreciated the significance of the Buddhist claim that the rebirth cannot be said to be the same person as the one who died. Indeed I cited influential Buddhist scholars who have argued explicitly that the rebirth is a *different* person to the one that died. It seems to me that on any Buddhist understanding of rebirth this is likely in most if not all cases to be correct. None of this in itself means the Buddhist position is wrong. But what it does mean is that, if the Buddhist position is correct, unless we attain a state (such as nirvāṇa) where in some way or another our rebirth will not matter, our death in this life is actually, really, the death of us. Death will be the end for *us*. Traditionally, at least on the day-to-day level,

Buddhists tend to miss appreciating this fact through using language such as ‘my rebirth’, and ‘concern for *one*’s future lives’. But actually any rebirth (say, as a cockroach in South America) would not be *oneself*<sup>11</sup> and there is a serious question therefore as to why one should care at all about ‘one’s’ future rebirths. Of course, one Buddhist response would be to say that it is an example of the very egoism one is trying to escape to be concerned whether the rebirth will be *oneself* or not. But I am not sure that helps much.

I began to see that if Buddhism were correct then unless I attained enlightenment or something like it in this life, *I* - this person, the person I am - would have no hope. Clearly I was not going to attain enlightenment in this life, and most Buddhists would say exactly the same thing about themselves too. So I, and all my friends and family, have in themselves no hope. Not only that: actually from a Buddhist perspective in the scale of infinite time the significance of each of us as such, as the person we are, converges on nothing. Even if a Buddhist might think I was unduly preoccupied with myself and my own survival, nevertheless Buddhism for me was “hope-less”.

### **Reincarnation - incompatible with Catholic orthodoxy**

Reincarnation was well known in ancient Greece and Rome, and has never been part of Christian orthodoxy. Indeed it is radically at variance with some central themes of Christian life and practice. It could not be compatible, for example, with a central feature of Christian belief from the very beginning, a belief affirmed every time we say the Creed - the resurrection of the body. For clearly with reincarnation being the case, which of our many bodies would be resurrected at the future time when Christ appears again and there is a ‘new heaven and a new earth’ (Rv 21:1). The Buddhist notion of reincarnation not only is incompatible with personal identity across lifetimes, it is incompatible with the infinite preciousness we hold as Christians for each and every individual person, and it is also incompatible with the significance of our actual human bodies in making us the persons we are. These are all variations on a theme, and that theme springs also from the Buddhist rejection of an all-good creator God. If there is no Creator then we cannot affirm that the world, as His creation, is fundamentally *good*. If creation is not as such good, then we as the individual persons we are cannot be fundamentally good, and all the aspects that go to make up us as the individual persons we are - including, of course, our bodies and our

relationships - are not fundamentally good either. Effectively, no matter how much someone may love us, or we may love them, as the individual persons that we are, in the balance of infinite time we are insignificant and disposable.

### Suffering

Buddhism, of course, starts from suffering and the need to overcome it. The existence of suffering is a major problem in philosophical theology, but Christians traditionally have not thought that suffering is completely incompatible with creation by an all-good and all-powerful God. Christianity is not about the mind. It is all about God and His dealings in history with His creation. As it relates to each one of us, Christianity is all about our relationships with God and hence His creation, and it is all about bringing our lives into harmony with God's intentions and wishes for us. In the light of this, the issue of suffering is not *as such* the problem. It is perfectly possible that in the fallen world in which we now live individual cases of suffering may be God's intention, and thus *in those contexts and under those circumstances* suffering may be something if not to be welcomed nevertheless to be accepted - even the right thing - rather than axiomatically wrong, to be avoided or overcome.

### **Suffering: sign of imperfection**

For the Buddhist a person suffers precisely because he or she is not enlightened. It makes no sense to talk about fully enlightened people, those who have attained the ultimate final goal, really suffering. Suffering is to that extent a sign of imperfection. More than that, suffering is a direct result through karma of vicious deeds in the past. The further one advances on the Buddhist path the less one does vicious deeds, and correspondingly (it is held) the less one suffers.<sup>12</sup> There is a direct similarity here not with orthodox Christianity but rather with some of the early Christian heresies such as those classed under Gnosticism.<sup>13</sup> One second century Gnostic, Basileides, put it this way concerning someone who is apparently sinless yet still suffers (Stevenson, 1987;78):

“He does not sin; but he is not to be reckoned as without sinfulness... [I]f I see the man without sin... suffering, even if he has done nothing wrong I

should say that he is wicked because of his desire to sin.”

The man who is absolutely sinless, without even the desire to sin, could never suffer. Thus for Gnostics Jesus Christ as such simply could not have suffered, and various strategies were adopted to explain what happened at the crucifixion such that either it was not the sinless Jesus who was crucified but rather someone else, or that the crucifixion did not really involve Jesus suffering, experiencing pain, but merely appeared to do so. Basileides himself, for example, reportedly held that through His power Jesus switched appearances with Simon of Cyrene. Thus Simon was crucified instead. Jesus stood to one side, laughing at the mistake (see Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.24.2, *in op. cit.*:77). For Buddhists too, in the modern world, wishing to respond to the figure of Jesus, there is a major problem of how to explain the orthodox Christian view that He *actually suffered*, and Christian interest in that suffering - shown in the use of the crucifix - is to Buddhists a source of fascinated incomprehension.

### **Christianity and redemptive suffering**

Jesus for a Buddhist was not, of course, God Incarnate. He must have been simply a good man at the most. But however one looks at it, if He suffered He must also have been far from being enlightened. For a Mainstream Buddhist position all the sufferings of Christ must have resulted naturally and quasi-automatically from vicious former acts ('due to karma'). There is a Mahāyāna approach that could see Him either as a bodhisattva working His way towards Buddhahood, or as an emanation from either a 'celestial bodhisattva' (like Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion) or from a Buddha, on the model of the 'Dimension of Magical Transformation', seeking to benefit people for whom His sort of teaching might help spiritually (see the '[Dimensions of the Buddha](#)', above). The problem with these strategies, from a Christian point of view, is that (quite apart from the denial of Christ's divinity) each would be radically unsatisfactory to Christian orthodoxy. If Jesus Christ was a bodhisattva working towards Buddhahood, His suffering, due to karma, entails that He must have been very much a beginner. He was far indeed from the exalted state of a Buddha. If He really was an emanation, from either a bodhisattva or a Buddha, He was simply a magical creation, a beneficial but fundamentally fictitious image or 'conjuring trick'. He did not suffer, of course, but simply because He was

presumably incapable of any real feelings or genuine emotions at all. Jesus did not suffer simply because He was not a fully embodied human being. This position is indeed identical to one well-known Gnostic strategy, the early Church heresy known as *docetism* ('appearance-ism').

The inability of Buddhism to cope with the suffering of Jesus, together with its similarity in this respect to certain well-known Gnostic approaches deemed quite clearly heretical by the early Church, suggest that Buddhism and orthodox Christianity are really radically at variance in their understanding and treatment of suffering. Since suffering is central, in very different ways, to both religions so once more we see that - notwithstanding superficial similarities that are often overplayed - both religions are really very different from each other. For orthodox Christianity Christ suffered. A Buddha, finally and *qua* Buddha, does not.<sup>14</sup> Jesus Christ's suffering is central to His salvific activity. We might say that Christ is effective as a saviour inasmuch as He suffers. A bodhisattva can experience suffering, but only insofar as he or she has not advanced very far as a bodhisattva. Therefore the bodhisattva suffers *inasmuch* as he or she is as such *ineffective* as a bodhisattva.

### **Is suffering always bad?**

The wider issue of the theology of suffering in Christianity is far too big a topic for the present context. I refer those who are interested to Pope John Paul II's 1984 apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris*.<sup>15</sup> Particularly important, though, is the way in which the Pope (drawing on the 'Suffering Servant' passages in *Isaiah*) brings out the many central positive features of suffering in Christianity. He is even prepared to refer to it as 'good': '[S]uffering...has a special value in the eyes of the Church. It is something good, before which the Church bows down in reverence with all the depth of her faith in the Redemption' (sect. 24). In fact, 'each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ' (sect. 19). And drawing on the theology of St. Paul (e.g. *Col* 1:24) Pope John Paul speaks of suffering as 'a vocation' (in a way that reads particularly poignantly given his own many years of very public suffering before his death in 2005):

"Christ *did not conceal* from his listeners the *need for suffering*... These persecutions and tribulations will also be, as it were, a *particular proof* of likeness to Christ and union with him... Christ has overcome the world

definitively by his Resurrection. Yet, because of the relationship between the Resurrection and his Passion and death, he has at the same time overcome the world by his suffering... Down through the centuries and generations it has been seen that *in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ*, a special grace... A result of such a conversion is not only that the individual discovers the salvific meaning of suffering but above all that he becomes a completely new person. He discovers a new dimension, as it were, of *his entire life and vocation*" (sect 26; italics original).

### **Absence of suffering and the final goal**

In suffering, anyone (and not just a Christian) can associate themselves with Christ's act of redemption. It is by no means the case that suffering is axiomatically always to be turned away from. But, it may be objected, surely the *goals* of Buddhism and Christianity are the same inasmuch as they are themselves associated with the final overthrow of all suffering.

I am not sure that is obviously the case. From a Christian point of view there is a need to distinguish between the state of the Saints - including their postmortem state - in the current situation of the Church still embattled, and the 'final scene of heavenly glory':

'Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, 'Look, here God lives among human beings. He will *make his home among them; they will be his people*, and he will be their God, *God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes*; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain. The world of the past has gone.' Then the One sitting on the throne spoke. "Look, I am making the whole of creation new.'" (Rv 21:3-5; *New Jerusalem Bible*, italics original)

Thomas G. Weinandy argues persuasively that under the current state of the Church Christ, as its Head, must continue in a way to suffer, as do all the Saints: 'While Jesus is gloriously risen, and thus beyond sin and death and so evil, yet as head of his body, which is still suffering under the constraints of sin, evil, and death, he too, as the head, is still, in some real sense, suffering' (2000:252). Moreover, Weinandy points out, through the Communion of Saints the Saints too 'in solidarity with the "earthly" body...indeed continue to suffer in union with Christ their head' (*op. cit.*:256, note 26). Thus we might say that in 'attaining Heaven' after death Catholic Christians do not

consider that they absolutely go beyond all suffering.

### **Vulnerability of love: possibility of suffering**

But what of the ‘final scene of heavenly glory’ mentioned above from the Book of *Revelation*? That certainly looks like a state beyond all suffering. Isn’t it *in this respect* finally the same as the goal of Buddhism? I think not. But to explain why I need to say a little more about one major reason why it is that, it seems to me, Christians need to be so concerned about the overriding Buddhist search for a final end to all suffering.

I want to draw here on something that was said by Pope Benedict XVI, when still Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, in the final pages of his book *Salt of the Earth*:

“Indeed, love means being dependent on something that perhaps can be taken away from me, and it therefore introduces a huge risk of suffering into my life. Hence the express or tacit refusal: before having constantly to bear this risk, before seeing my self-determination limited, before coming to depend on something I can’t control so that I can suddenly plunge into nothingness, I would rather not have love. Whereas the decision that comes from Christ is another: Yes to love, for it alone, precisely with the risk of suffering and the risk of losing oneself, brings man to himself and makes him what he should be. I think that is really the true drama of history. In the many opposing fronts it can ultimately be reduced to this formula: Yes or no to love.” (Ratzinger (1997:282-3).

What Pope Benedict was saying here is that love necessarily entails risks, and hence love necessarily entails the chance of suffering. When God, who is Love, created mankind He took risks. God Himself did not sidestep risks. And God Himself suffered, *qua* Second Person of the Trinity, in His incarnation and passion. But if love necessarily entails taking risks, and risks necessarily entail the complete and open possibility - though not necessarily the actuality - of suffering then a perfect community of love would be a community where each is utterly open to the other and hence utterly exposed to risk, utterly vulnerable, utterly in the hands of everyone else. And yet it seems that no one betrays that vulnerability. That, perhaps - I am only speculating here - may be the final scene of heavenly glory, where ‘God...will wipe away all tears from their eyes.’ This is not a world with no possibility of suffering. It is a world with, in a way, *every possibility* of suffering, since it is

a world of complete trust and love, a world of complete vulnerability to each other. But while it has every possibility of suffering, the world of the Saints in the final restored Kingdom on earth - those who love God, and love His creation - will be a world with no *actuality* of suffering. For in that world love, the vulnerability of trust, with those who inhabit that world, is never betrayed. But the enlightened person in Buddhism, finally - in their final state, their very final achievement as enlightened persons - *by definition* cannot suffer. If Pope Benedict is right, it follows that the enlightened person in Buddhism by definition, necessarily, finally cannot love. Love is always open to the possibility of suffering. Where suffering is impossible there can be no love. Finally, a Buddha risks nothing in helping others. If he cannot suffer then he cannot make himself vulnerable. Indeed, there is very considerable doubt whether there is a concept that is both approved of by Buddhism and can be adequately translated as 'love'. The more common expression used in English writing on Buddhism is not the *love* of the Buddha, but rather the compassion of the Buddha for those who suffer. Yet even here I have my doubts whether 'compassion' is the best translation for the original terms used (most commonly *karuṇā*). Certainly etymologically 'compassion' must presumably be related to 'suffering with' someone. In that case, at least etymologically, a Buddha could not have compassion either. When the Blessed Virgin stood at the foot of the Cross, she had compassion. I wonder if an understanding of the Buddha's view of those who still suffer may not be better expressed with the term 'pity'.

### **Christianity and Buddhism - final goals?**

Either way, in making his or her goal the final cessation of all suffering, a Buddhist (whether he or she realises it or not) also has to aim for the final cessation of love. This is because the vulnerability of love is too open to suffering for compatibility with Buddhist enlightenment. I want to argue that the final goals of Buddhism and Christianity here are therefore utterly different. Even where the final goals involve no suffering - as in the final Buddhist enlightenment and the final state of heavenly glory in the 'new heaven and new earth' - the differences could not be more marked. On the one hand no suffering necessarily entails no love. The enlightened person is, in terms of taking risks *for himself*, invulnerable, and hence *in that respect* wrapped up in himself. But for the Christian no actual suffering is a result of



the completeness of love. The total vulnerability, complete openness, to others makes suffering completely possible for the Christian in a way in which for the enlightened Buddhist it is a logical impossibility. In the final heavenly state, suffering is a contingent - not a logical - impossibility. With genuine lovers, tested in the crucible of Sainthood, abusing the vulnerability of others is as a matter of fact (we can predict) not going to happen.

### **Communal nature of Christian goal**

And note that the final scene of glory in God's restored Kingdom on earth is just that - a *community* of lovers. It is not a state of mind, defined in terms of a state of freedom from greed, hatred and delusion. It is certainly not simply some sort of eternal mystical experience. An eternal mystical experience, which could easily be a state of our own disembodied minds, would not require the 'new heavens and a new earth' that we are promised God will bring for those that love Him. Here we meet another absolutely central difference of Buddhism from Christianity. Christianity is not about the mind, but is all about God and our relationship with Him and through Him with His creation. Consider the following scenario: imagine that it turned out to be true that there existed only one thing - one's own mind (in philosophy this view is called *solipsism*). In that world, a world of just one's own mind, one could still obtain the goal of Buddhism. This is because Buddhism is all about the mind and its transformation. But if solipsism turned out to be true, the goal of Christianity would be quite impossible. With solipsism there could not be a loving relationship with God and His creation in a community of love, a community precisely of the new Israel in a newly recreated world, with a new heaven and a new earth, in which (please God) we will all be present to each other in the vulnerability of love.

And this newly recreated, redeemed, world is one that Our Lord instituted in His resurrection. It is already in formation. As Christians we are called to take part now in the work for justice and righteousness that will bring about the full presence, the full and final incarnation, of God's eternal Kingdom on earth. Just as our goal is not simply to do with the mind, so our actions here and now are not simply to do with the mind either. It should be clear now why this is the case. Christian involvement with the world in the cause of righteousness stems from a Christian belief in God and the embodied goodness of His Creation, together with a belief that the final goal will

involve this very embodied Creation. It is a final goal already inaugurated by God Himself in the resurrection of His Son, a goal that we Christians are required to help in bringing to its conclusion. And that help we give to God - who has no need of our help but who welcomes it for our own sakes - may well entail our suffering too (see *Col* 1:24), just as God in Jesus Christ suffered, and triumphed over suffering. In a way, if Buddhism is all to do with the mind then Christianity is all about the body. Christian involvement with the world in the cause of righteousness springs naturally from the very essence of Christianity, from all those ways in which we have seen Christianity is radically at variance with Buddhism. In the modern world movements such as 'Engaged Buddhism' - giving a Buddhist approach to the social, political and economic quest for justice - that are now so popular particularly among Western converts to Buddhism and Westernised Buddhists could never have arisen, I suggest, except as in the light of and as a response to Christianity.

### **On meditation**

Buddhists, it is widely held, are experts in meditation. Many people consider that positive benefit can be gained as Christians in taking up basic Buddhist meditation practices. As we have seen above, there are broadly speaking two types of Buddhist meditation - calming and insight meditation. Usually when Christians think of taking up Buddhist meditation they mean calming meditation. Calming meditation leads relatively quickly to calm, relaxation, and much improved concentration. It is reasonable to suggest that these are qualities we could all benefit from. They would be of obvious value, therefore, to Christians too.

### **Meditation - some concerns**

This seems to me to be indisputable. Therein, in a way, lies the problem. Yes, being calm, relaxed and having improved concentration are valuable. What they are not, in themselves, is *religiously* valuable. So the first problem with Christians taking up Buddhist meditation practices is that inasmuch as the practices teach useful techniques ('life-strategies') applicable to just about everyone, they may come to substitute for what a Christian should be doing, which is nurturing a deep and rich prayer life. That is, prayer directed to the

living God, a God who meets us not so much when we are cross-legged, but rather when we are on our knees, even on our faces in trembling and adoration, and engaging in God's work of ushering in the Kingdom of justice and righteousness. There is nothing wrong with learning to relax. I use a relaxation CD programme myself, with gentle muscle-relaxing advice set to wonderful classical music. But I hope I do not confuse it with my religious duty to God and His creation, such as my duty of prayer, and prayerful engagement in the Mass. Learning to relax bears as much relationship to prayer as having a glass of wine after a hard day's work bears to taking communion in the Holy Mass.

There is of course a wonderful *Christian* tradition of advice for prayerful enrichment of the spiritual life, from the early Church onwards. It seems to me no one need contemplate Buddhist meditation, if they have not yet lived and prayed their way through Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* and St Francis de Sales's *Introduction to a Devout Life*, to mention just a couple of my own favourites. Which Catholic has perfected the practice of the Rosary, Stations of the Cross, saying the Divine Office, daily Mass attendance, or even praying the Jesus Prayer, that derives from Eastern Orthodoxy and the Church Fathers? Of course, there is also a Christian tradition of deep, silent, wordless, meditation. But it is an *advanced* stage, infused with grace, and is precisely a Christian meditation tradition that can only be developed within a specifically Christian liturgical, doctrinal and pedagogical context (see the *Catechism* on contemplative prayer, paras 2709ff.). Why should a Christian *need* to think of practising Buddhist meditation?

### **Can Christians adopt Buddhist meditation?**

And there is a second problem with Christians taking up Buddhist meditation. As someone begins to appreciate 'Buddhist' calming meditation, they may adopt other presuppositions or tenets of eastern religions, expressed or assumed in 'meditation circles', alongside and eventually in substitution for Christian truth. We sometimes find, for example, the suggestion that meditators discover that all religions lead to the same ineffable goal. Dogmatic differences are simply words, and there is an Absolute accessible in mystical meditative experience that is beyond all words. Hence, of course, all expressed truth - and thus the teachings of the Church - are finally false. The meditator knows in his or her own personal experience the truth, a truth

that stands over and against the teachings of the Church. Since the Absolute is beyond all words, Jesus Christ cannot have been God (except in the sense that we are all 'God', since 'God' is just another name for the truth discovered in our own inner experience). Jesus does not reveal God to us in any definitive and unique way. He was just a good man, one of many such good men. There will be many more, and indeed we can all realise the 'Christ Nature' - modelled, perhaps, on the Buddha Nature spoken of in some Buddhist traditions - within us.<sup>16</sup>

In a very useful, recent book on the practice of prayer among the early Church Fathers, the Benedictine, Fr Gabriel Bunge, himself a hermit since 1980, has drawn attention to the centrality of physical posture in early Christian prayer.<sup>17</sup> The physical posture, he urges, is not an optional extra. He points out that a Buddhist monk does not need to face a particular direction when meditating, since a Buddhist is not directed outwards to Another, to God. But in the early Church everyone knew that if one wanted seriously to pray it was necessary to face East, towards the Lord (2002:71). The point is a serious one. Prayer is embodied in physical posture. Body and mind are intimately connected. Arguably the prayer is not the same where even something so simple as the posture differs. It could be suggested too that if someone meets God in prayer - if one really, seriously, meets God in prayer, not just some deep bit of oneself but really the *Living God* - such a person might not remain seated on a meditation cushion! Anyway, while 'sitting quietly in the presence of the Lord' clearly is an appropriate form of Christian prayer (contemplative prayer), the meditator needs careful attention not to substitute a passive awareness of him- or herself for a real meeting with God. For God is not our own subjective depths, but absolutely objective, and *qua* God Wholly Other than us. Fr Bunge adds a severe note of warning (*op. cit.*:194):

'The fact is, whether you like it or not, that the choice of the 'means' already determines the result... Anyone who devotes himself to 'practices' and 'methods' that are not home-grown in the soil of his own faith will imperceptibly be led toward that 'faith' which developed these practices as a genuine expression of itself. Today plenty of people are going through this painful experience, even though many do not dare admit even to themselves that they have strayed from the path.'

### Summary of concerns: prayer and meditation

So, to summarise: the Buddhist meditation that someone might learn is either a mere technique of relaxation, concentration and so on (as occurs when one learns, for example, the calming meditation practice of ‘mindfulness of breathing’) or it has more content (as with, for example, insight meditation). Regarding the extent to which the Buddhist meditation technique is mere relaxation, there is a danger that it may take over the practitioner’s spiritual practice, replacing the hard work of prayer with the pleasures of relaxation sessions.<sup>18</sup> Someone can come to *prefer* Buddhist meditation to prayer. It is more enjoyable. Instead of nurturing one’s relationships with God and His creation a person simply nurtures their relationship with themselves. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, put it (1990:4-5):

‘Christian prayer is always determined by the structure of the Christian faith, in which the very truth of God and creatures shines forth. For this reason it is defined, properly speaking, as a personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God. It expresses therefore the communion of redeemed creatures with the intimate life of the Persons of the Trinity. This communion, based on Baptism and the Eucharist, source and summit of the life of the Church, implies an attitude of conversion, a flight from ‘self’ to the ‘You’ of God. Thus Christian prayer is at the same time always authentically personal and communitarian. It flees from impersonal techniques or from concentrating on oneself, which can create a kind of rut, imprisoning the person praying in spiritual privatism which is incapable of a free openness to the transcendental God.’

The Congregation (1990:23) also notes that ‘genuine prayer as the great spiritual masters teach, stirs up in the person who prays an ardent charity which moves him to collaborate in the mission of the Church and to serve his brothers for the greater glory of God.’ I suggest that none of this needs Buddhist meditation, and Buddhist meditation might detract from it. Christ, remember, did not practise anything like Buddhist meditation. Actually ‘[t]he prayer of Jesus has been entrusted to the Church (“Pray then like this” - Lk 11:2). This is why when a Christian prays, even if he is alone, his prayer is in fact always within the framework of the “Communion of Saints” in which and with which he prays, whether in a public and liturgical way or in a private manner’ (Congregation 1990: 8). We find the same view expressed in the *Catechism* (para. 2707):

‘There are many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters. Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly, lest they come to resemble the three first kinds of soil in the parable of the sower. But a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus.’

And St Francis de Sales shows just how very different Christianity is from Buddhism in all of this when he urges that finally private practices like meditation are relatively not so important compared with the public, communal, meeting with God in, for example, the Mass (1956:86):

‘Indeed, to speak once for all, there is always more benefit and comfort to be derived from the public offices of the Church than from private devotions. God has ordained that communion of prayers should always have preference to every kind of private prayer.’

On the other hand, to the extent to which the Christian practitioner of Buddhist meditation adopts meditation with actual religious content, there is a danger of adopting doctrinal positions that are not those of orthodox Catholic Christianity. My own experience meeting Christians who practise forms of meditation deriving from Buddhism suggests that all too often this is what happens. It is worth remembering that the very word ‘heresy’ comes from the Greek *hairesis*, choice. Choosing various Buddhist, or quasi-Buddhist, positions that are at variance with orthodoxy (and persisting in that even when their unorthodoxy is pointed out) is flirting dangerously with heresy. So too is the idea that we can ourselves through our own striving in meditation or in any other spiritual or ethical practice attain to spiritual heights. That is the old heresy of Pelagianism.

We cannot assault heaven with our meditations. God comes to us freely, in grace. And if we seek to see God we see Him in or through the publicly available figure of Jesus Christ. As St Francis de Sales puts it (1956:54-5):

‘By making [our Lord] often the subject of your meditation, your whole soul will be filled with Him. You will learn His ways and frame your actions according to His model. He is ‘the light of the world’. It is therefore, in Him and by Him and for Him that we must be instructed and enlightened... [B]y keeping close to our Saviour, by meditation and observing His words, actions, and affections, by the help of His grace, we shall learn to speak, to act, and to will like Him.’

Christian meditation is for coming closer to Christ,<sup>19</sup> not in strange mental states, or ‘mystical’ experiences but in our acts, in an increasingly Christlike

behaviour, so that we may be fitting inhabitants of the Kingdom.

### **Christian Buddhists? Choice and responsibility**

I have heard it said that there are those who think it is possible to be both a Christian and a Buddhist at the same time. I doubt it! This short introduction to some of the themes should indicate a number of areas where Christianity would need considerable reinterpretation if it were ever to be truly compatible with Buddhism as Buddhism has existed in doctrine, practice and history. For those who hold to the faith of the Catholic Church such a reinterpretation of Christianity is, it seems to me, impossible. Hence choices have to be made. And of course inasmuch as those choices are made, as far as one can tell, in knowledge and freedom a person is also responsible for the consequences of their choices. That is something on which both Buddhists and Christians are agreed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Where a source used is in Pali, I shall *normally* use the Pali (P) term, where it is in Sanskrit, the Sanskrit (S). The ‘default’ position is Sanskrit.

<sup>2</sup> Some books give this as ‘desire’. That is a mistranslation of e.g. the Pali *taṇhā*, which means literally ‘thirst’. Even the Buddhas have *desire*. What they lack is craving.

<sup>3</sup> Also as ‘not-Self’ (q.v.). These are said to be the ‘Three Marks of Things’.

<sup>4</sup> The five classes of events are known as the ‘five aggregates’ (S: *skandha*; P: *khandha*).

<sup>5</sup> I am generalising, although not too much. This does nevertheless become extremely complicated in later Indian Buddhist history and particularly when Buddhism leaves India and goes to e.g. China. For more details see Williams (1989, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Note that, in spite of common usage in books, this is the *only* proper use of this term - as a Mahāyāna term of abuse for those who do not follow the Mahāyāna way. The current neutral expression among scholars for Buddhists who do not adopt the Mahāyāna perspective is (as we have been using) simply ‘Mainstream Buddhism’. Note also, incidentally, that we cannot (as do many books) simply use Theravāda to refer to non-Mahāyāna Buddhism. *Theravāda* is a monastic ordination tradition, not in itself a vision of what Buddhism should finally be all about.

<sup>7</sup> I am translating this technical term as ‘aspect’ or ‘dimension’. More commonly it is translated as ‘body’. The Buddha in Mahāyāna is said to have three types of body. That could be confusing, especially if one tends to think of ‘body’ as contrasted with ‘soul’. For a fuller discussion see Williams (1989) (2000).

<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, some critics suggested that this was sailing very close to the apparently non-Buddhist doctrine of the ‘Self’.

<sup>9</sup> I am drawing here on a detailed discussion of some Buddhist arguments in Williams (2004).

<sup>10</sup> In this section I am drawing on material in Williams (2002).

<sup>11</sup> I.e. *me* - this point is not concerned with the Buddhist denial of the Self.

<sup>12</sup> Hence even though in Mahāyāna those who have taken the bodhisattva vow to become perfect Buddhas might be thought to positively opt for future rebirths in order to attain their distant goal, still in aiming for the higher achievement as they advance along it their ability to suffer *decreases* progressively.

<sup>13</sup> This is by no means the only similarity between Buddhism and Gnosticism. One other obvious example is the Gnostic aversion to the physical world and body, as well as the idea that the universe could be the result of an all-good and all-powerful Creator.

<sup>14</sup> Actually, this is a little complicated. There is evidence from early Mainstream Buddhist sources that the Buddha *did* feel pain, although he was freed from all unhealthy psychological associations (from greed, hatred and delusion) with the pain. After death, of course, an enlightened person no more feels any suffering at all. In much later Buddhist thought, and certainly in Mahāyāna, a Buddha *qua* Buddha simply does not feel any suffering.

<sup>15</sup> For a further brief discussion of Christian approaches to suffering see the CTS booklet *Giving Meaning to Suffering* (PA 4). An excellent, full, discussion can be found in Thomas G. Weinandy (2000), particularly chapter 10.

<sup>16</sup> For further examples, and discussion, see Congregation 1990: 10 ff.

<sup>17</sup> See here also Congregation 1990:21-3.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, calming meditation too can be hard work, but to that extent in Buddhism it still replaces prayer.

<sup>19</sup> See here, for example, the meditations on the life of Christ that form a central part of St Ignatius Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises. That is Christian, and for centuries it has inspired saints and martyrs who had never heard of Buddhist meditation.

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